

WELCOME TO THE MONKEY HOUSE

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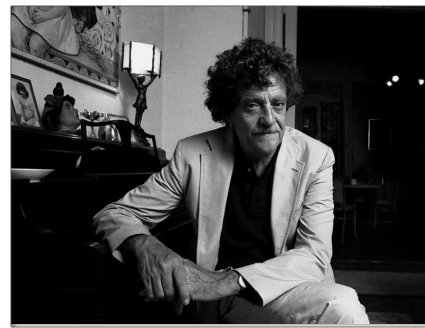
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SUMMARIES

BRIEF OVERVIEWS OF FIVE SELECTED STORIES



HARRISON BERGERON

Harrison Bergeron is a story set in a future where everyone is equal-- a utopia, so to speak. They are rendered this way by "handicaps". These include large, heavy objects that vary by size and weight to be attached to those born naturally strong; or disruptive devices that interrupt the thoughts of those born particularly intelligent. The son of George and Hazel, Harrison Bergeron is taken away by handicap generals before the story. He escapes, and appears on television before his parents, tearing away his handicaps and those of dancers around him. As he protests against the nature of the society around him and declares himself Emperor, he and the dancers are shot by a handicap general, Diana Moon Glampers. George and Hazel see this, and immediately forget about it due to their mental handicaps. Everything returns to normal, and the brief flare of resistance shown is smothered as quickly as it had been sparked.



LONG WALK TO FOREVER

Long Walk to Forever tells a story of two childhood friends, Newt and Catharine, who have been apart for years. Newt goes AWOL (absent without leave) from his military duties to return to Catharine. He finds that she is already engaged to Henry Stewart Chasens, but he tells her that he loves her anyway. The two of them take a walk, and Newt asks her about her husband-to-be. He kisses her twice; Catharine becomes flustered. Eventually, the two reach an orchard and sit beneath an apple tree. As Newt sleeps, Catharine admires him, and when he wakes up he rises to leave. As a last attempt, Newt asks Catharine to marry him, and she declines. He walks away, but soon stops, turns, and calls to her. She runs to him and hugs him, realizing she had always loved him and had been blind to it all along.



ALL THE KING'S HORSES

In *All the King's Horses*, a group of sixteen people (most of them soldiers) are taken hostage by a Communist leader, Pi Ying. Colonel Kelly is forced to play a deadly game of chess with their eccentric captor, using his own men, wife, and children as chess pieces. "Pieces" that are captured in the game are killed, but if Kelly wins, he earns his group's freedom. The Colonel is forced to make sacrifices as the game goes on in order to defeat Pi Ying. His love for his wife, children, and fellow soldiers hampers his playing strategy; he plays purely defensively in the first portion of the game. In the end, he chooses to give up his son, Jerry, in order to win, but Pi Ying is killed by a Chinese girl before he can destroy Kelly's son. A Russian man, Major Barzov, takes over for Pi Ying, spares Jerry, and loses. The party is set free with an invitation to play another game of chess sometime, and the Colonel emerges a stronger man as a result.



THE KID NOBODY COULD HANDLE

The Kid Nobody Could Handle follows George Helmholtz, an idealistic band teacher at Lincoln High School. As he is eating breakfast at a diner, the manager, Quinn, introduces him to Jim. He is Quinn's foster child, and he is rebellious and robotic; a juvenile delinquent. After that, an English teacher's classroom is ransacked in the night. Helmholtz catches Jim vandalizing a chemistry room the next night, and tries to convince him to change his ways. Jim's prized boots are snatched away from him, and he is given John Philip Sousa's trumpet in hopes that he will gain a "soul". In the morning, Helmholtz realizes that the trade had been futile upon seeing Jim's familiar, glazed-over expression. He smashes the trumpet, disillusioned, and Jim's facade cracks. Jim joins the band, finally inspired by Helmholtz to change his ways and seek a purpose in life.



EPICAC

EPICAC is the story of a lovesick mathematician and his interaction with a military supercomputer, EPICAC. The mathematician loves one of his colleagues, Pat, but Pat complains that he is a terrible romantic. Absentmindedly, he types a message in code to EPICAC, and to his surprise, it responds. He teaches the machine about love, girls, Pat, and poetry, and it churns out beautiful poems for him. He uses EPICAC's poems to woo Pat. Delighted, she agrees to marry him on the condition that he writes a poem to her on each anniversary, but when he tells this to the machine, he realizes that the machine has fallen in love with Pat as well. The mathematician explains the concept of fate to EPICAC--machines and humans are fated to remain apart. The next morning, EPICAC short-circuits itself, leaving him five-hundred poems, a suicide note detailing its thoughts on destiny, and its best wishes.

EPICAC

A FAVORITE STORY

EPICAC is a heart-wrenching story. It seems like a love story at first, with the romantically-inept narrator courting his colleague, but quickly escalates into something deeper. EPICAC, a military supercomputer that helps the narrator write poetry for Pat, feels--or thinks it feels--love for an unobtainable human, and you can't help but feel sorry for it. According to the narrator, destiny has bound it in carrying out his role as a military supercomputer. It makes you wonder what exactly destiny, love, and humanity are. EPICAC's probing questions at the end and the narrator's

responses ("Humans are made of protoplasm.") are proof that these concepts are not easily defined. The machine's poems are what captured Pat's heart, after all; why is the narrator entitled to marry her and EPICAC is fated to collect dust on the fourth floor of a building? I feel indignant, as well, about how the narrator decides to marry Pat so readily. The thought of telling her the truth behind those poems does not even cross his mind. Could you really call something built on such shady, dishonest foundations love? EPICAC seems much more pure,

and my respect for it was reinforced in the end, when it leaves 500 poems and his best wishes to the narrator. It does not even know of bitterness or jealousy; its suicide note is rueful and sorrowful, with no antagonism at all.

This story has a relatively simple plot, but it makes you think nonetheless. The unfairness of it all and the questions it raises have made it one of the most memorable short stories I have ever read.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

GEORGE HELMHOLTZ

George Helmholtz is a central character and protagonist in *The Kid Nobody Could Handle*. He is a good-natured, idealist band teacher at Lincoln High School with a passion for music that he tries to instill in all of his students—even those without talent.

As a round, dynamic character, he possesses a mosaic of traits that make him exceedingly lovable and real.

His optimism is one of his most apparent traits, and it is almost infectious. This is evident in this quote: “C Band set out on its quest for beauty—set out like a rusty switch engine, with valves stuck, pipes clogged, unions leaking, bearings dry. Helmholtz was still smiling at the end of the hour, because he’d heard in his mind the music as it was going to be someday.”

He is also naive and not particularly materialistic, and this apparently makes him a bad businessman. Rather than pursuing money, all he sees in the hill that he sells to Quinn is the pleasure involved in loitering there. He knows that John Philip Sousa’s trumpet is worth a fortune, as well, but he sees its true value and knows that a trumpet in the right hands is worth much more than its material cost.

Helmholtz is compassionate towards Jim, despite his shady and robotic behavior.

Other teachers would report Jim upon catching him red-handed, vandalizing a chemistry classroom. Helmholtz, instead, offers Jim a place in his band. He cares enough about finding Jim a purpose to live that he ends up breaking his trumpet in frustration, and upon seeing such a jolly man break down, Jim’s tough exterior shatters.

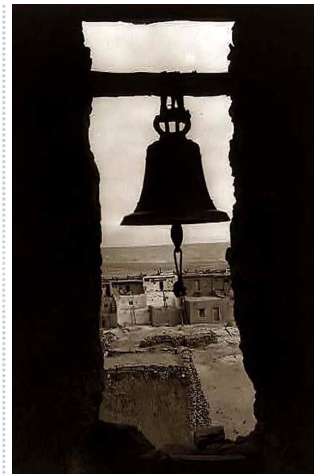
Helmholtz also changes throughout the story, but only briefly. His idealism falters a bit when he fails in persuading Jim to join the band. “‘Life is no damn good,’” he says. He spends a breakfast wracked with disappointment and hopelessness. When Jim turns over a new leaf, however, he bounces back to his old, warmly optimistic self. Some of his final words include, “Love yourself.” and he tells the band to make the world a more beautiful place.



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A chess game.



The bell tower.

HARRISON BERGERON

In *Harrison Bergeron*, there are many symbols. The “handicaps” are particularly obvious ones. They symbolize the absurdity of trying to achieve total equality, and the squashing of individuality. After all, that is what they are made to do, kneading the abnormalities out of people and making them all similarly ugly, lumbering idiots. The character of Harrison might symbolize resistance and freedom, but his quick demise also implies that such defiance would be quickly exterminated in Kurt Vonnegut’s 2081. The noises George Bergeron hears throughout the story also seem to mirror what is going on. A gunshot shatters George’s train of thought as Diana Moon Glampers murders Harrison, for instance.

LONG WALK TO FOREVER

Long Walk to Forever is full of symbols. In the very beginning, Newt interrupts Catharine

while she is looking through a bride book. The bride book could symbolize marriage and obligation, and society’s expectations of love. Newt does not seem to approve of all of this, and draws attention to the book by talking about giving the couple a spoon, and finding out what Catharine’s “silver pattern” is. The orchard, on the other hand, symbolizes nature and true love, untainted by all of the processes of marriage. While the couple sits beneath the apple tree, as well, a bell tower for a school for the blind chimes--this could symbolize how “love is blind”, or possibly how Catharine had been blind to Newt’s love for a very long time. The names of Newt and Henry Stuart Chasens also hold meaning. Newt is a one-syllable name; plain and true to nature. Henry Stuart Chasens gives the impression of refinement and sophistication, and they reflect these people’s ways of approaching love.

OBJECTS THAT STAND FOR THEMSELVES AND SOMETHING ELSE

SYMBOLISM

ALL THE KING'S HORSES

All the King's Horses, in relation to previous stories, does not have as many apparent symbols. The game of chess is the most obvious. Pi Ying, in the beginning, compares the nature of the game to war, and that is exactly what it symbolizes. It also represents sacrifice; in both war and chess, a person must make sacrifices to achieve an objective. Colonel Kelly's wife and children might symbolize the selfishness involved in sacrifice, and how people might choose to save their loved ones instead of doing what is best for his group as a whole.

THE KID NOBODY COULD HANDLE

In *The Kid Nobody Could Handle*, important symbols include Jim's boots and feet, and John Philip Sousa's trumpet. Jim's boots are, essentially, a representation of his cold, juvenile-delinquent exterior. He prizes them greatly, and seems to wear it all the time. In reality, however, they conceal weak-looking, pathetic little feet. Jim's feet symbolize his soft interior, and the side of him that probably suffers due to his lack of love and how he has been tossed between foster families for his entire life. The trumpet

Helmholtz gives to Jim could symbolize hope and passion. The trumpet gives Jim a reason to live and a sense of hope; though he starts out as the worst trumpet in the worst band in the school, Helmholtz knows he and the band will make their way up under his guidance.

EPICAC

In *EPICAC*, the symbols are relatively hard to find. One symbol could be the "protoplasm" that the narrator mentions to EPICAC

as he explains why humans are superior. It is a made-up material, and the narrator has great trouble trying to find a true difference. This could symbolize how it is possible that there is not much of a difference between machines and humans after all. EPICAC's suicide might symbolize the unfairness of fate and destiny. It does not want to continue being a machine and thinking about war if it cannot love or deviate from this path, so it short-circuits itself.



The trumpet gives Jim a reason to live and a sense of hope; though he starts out as the worst trumpet in the worst band in the school, Helmholtz knows he and the band will make their way up under his guidance.

THEME

AN UNDERLYING MAIN IDEA OR TRUTH ABOUT LIFE; HUMANITY AND ALL ITS FACETS.

HARRISON BERGERON

Harrison Bergeron's theme is a very interesting one. The story centers around the possible consequences of total equality and the futility of pursuing it. Each person's talents make up their unique personality, and to take away that is to take away the development of society and create mindless, crippled robots. Conformity can go too far, as demonstrated by this story's pathetically handicapped characters like George and Hazel Bergeron. Individuality is a key factor in being human, and ties in to other themes presented by this collection of short stories.

LONG WALK TO FOREVER

Long Walk to Forever explores how marriage and true love can clash. Catharine must make a choice, in this story, between her engagement and the man she really adores, and she chooses Newt in the end. This story seems to satirize the notion of marriage being so complex with symbols like the bride book. True love can conquer all, and a ceremony meant to bring lovers together should not get in the way. Love, as well, is an important facet of humanity.

ALL THE KING'S HORSES

All the King's Horses centers around the sacrifice and sorrow involved in war, and its similarities to a chess game. Sacrifices must be made in battles, though they may be difficult and heart-breaking. The story displays the moral dilemma involved in deciding between individuals that you love and a group as a whole. Sacrifice, sorrow, and compassion that sometimes interferes with logical decision-making is also something that makes us human.

THE KID NOBODY COULD HANDLE

The Kid Nobody Could Handle is a heartwarming story that talks about how even people who are seemingly emotionless can find joy in simple hobbies like music. Jim, a neglected

and robotic teen, finds a purpose and a "soul" upon beginning to play the trumpet; it is never too late to change the course of your life and take up something new, it seems. A message this story seems to convey is to pursue your dreams, love yourself, and find a passion. At the end of the story, Helmholtz says to his band, "Our aim is to make the world more beautiful than it was when we came into it. It can be done. You can do it."

A small cry of despair come from Jim Donnini. It was meant to be private, but it pierced every ear with its poignancy.

'How?' said Jim.

'Love yourself,' said Helmholtz, 'and make your instrument sing about it.'

Indeed, passion and a love of life is another side of being human that this story celebrates.

EPICAC

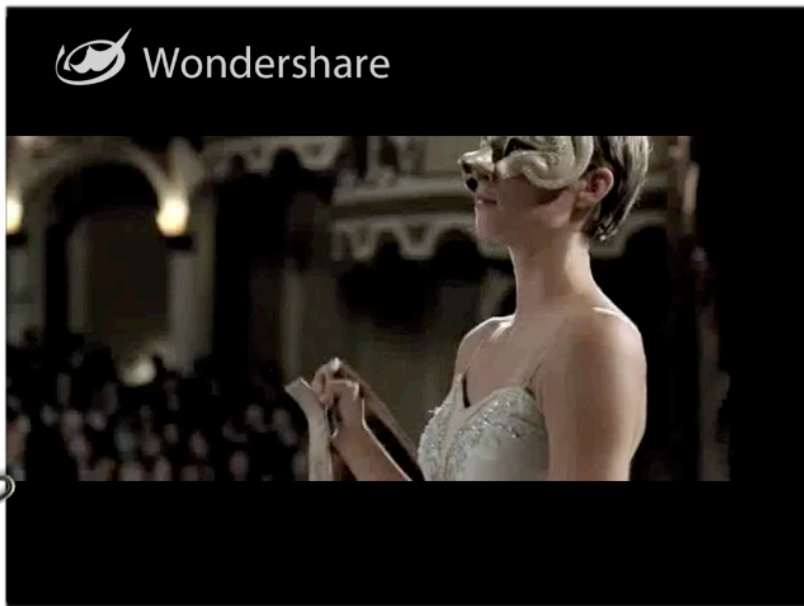
EPICAC has many underlying messages, and shines a new light on questions about the difference between humans and machines, and what love, emotions, and interpersonal relationships constitute. *EPICAC's* innocence and lack of wrath evokes pity for it, even though it is a supercomputer destined to direct missiles for the military. Evidently, it can feel love too, and it can feel hopeless enough to suicide. In its suicide note, *EPICAC* says, "I don't want to be a machine, and I don't want to think about war." As a fantastic poet and a noble friend, why is *EPICAC* destined to be a machine? This story questions the very nature of humanity, and wraps up the central theme of these five stories by shaking its foundations.

REAL LIFE CONNECTIONS

Harrison Bergeron's theme of the pursuit of total equality can be seen in many circumstances in the real world. Many schools, for instance, are apparently banning dodgeball and even tag (http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/2006/writers/frank_deford/10/25/tag/). Tag apparently singles out children and those who are naturally unathletic are sometimes picked on, or have difficulty tagging others. Banning tag would make the playground more

"equal", and prevent those born unable to run as fast from becoming discouraged. Although this is not nearly as extreme as what takes place in *Harrison Bergeron*, it is still an attempt at achieving equality. The problem with such bans is that they keep people who are exceptionally good from standing out as well. Other policies like affirmative action are also somewhat similar--they give an advantage to people who were originally

disadvantaged in order to level the playing field. Still more examples would include entire government systems like socialism and communism, which emphasize equality through the distribution of money. While equality is definitely something we strive for, *Harrison Bergeron's* message urges us to tread carefully.



A trailer of the movie 2081, based on *Harrison Bergeron*. Click to play.

